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Beyond the Western Frame: Exploring the Narrative Tradition of Subanen Short Stories

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Abstract

This study examines ten Subanen short stories selected from *Suk Tinändaan Nängak: Ang Kultura sa mga Subanén*, compiled by Fr. Bertram Tiemeyer, O.F.M., focusing on their structure, themes and tone. Anchored in the context of the Philippines' K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum—which promotes the use of mother tongue and local literature—this research employs qualitative content analysis to explore the unique narrative elements rooted in indigenous Subanen storytelling traditions. Findings reveal a blend of structural adherence and deviation from conventional Western plot forms, reflecting the oral narrative style of the Subanen people. Common settings include natural landscapes such as forests, farms, and streams, highlighting a deep connection to the environment. Characterization ranges from archetypal figures to named individuals, with all stories told from a third-person perspective. Thematically, the stories explore universal human experiences—love, heroism, survival, deception, judgment, and conflict—through a culturally specific lens. Tone analysis, supported by IBM Watson's Tone Analyzer, identifies joy, sadness, fear, and analytical reflection as dominant emotional undercurrents. The study concludes that Subanen short stories preserve oral tradition within written form, offering a distinct Indigenous literary aesthetic that deserves greater scholarly attention and integration into language and literature education.

I. INTRODUCTION

The integration of literature in language education continues to be a subject of scholarly interest, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Literature, when used as a pedagogical tool, serves not only to enhance language proficiency but also to introduce learners to diverse cultural narratives and worldviews (Paran, 2016; Hall, 2019). Recent shifts in language education—particularly in

postcolonial and indigenous contexts—have emphasized the need to center learners' lived experiences and cultural identities through localized literary content (Tupas, 2021; Garcia & Flores, 2022).

In the Philippines, the introduction of the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum and the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) have brought to the forefront the value of integrating

local literature into language instruction, especially during the early grades (Palmer et al., 2020; Cervantes, 2022). The curriculum explicitly mandates the use of learners' first languages as mediums of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3. This pedagogical shift affirms that language learning is most effective when rooted in the linguistic and cultural experiences of the child (Dekker & Dumatog, 2021).

Despite these progressive reforms, a persistent gap remains in the availability of culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate materials for indigenous learners. Many indigenous languages, such as Subanen, lack accessible and pedagogically curated literary resources that could be used in formal classroom settings (Castillo & Martin, 2020; Ball & McIvor, 2019). While the Philippines has a rich oral tradition among its ethnolinguistic groups, much of this literature remains undocumented or under-analyzed. Moreover, most existing studies focus either on linguistic preservation or educational policy implementation, with few addressing the *literary structure, themes, and pedagogical potential* of indigenous texts for classroom use (Esteban & Rizaldo, 2023; Pennington, 2018).

The Subanen people of Zamboanga del Sur possess a wealth of oral literary traditions—short stories, poems, riddles, and songs—that reflect their indigenous knowledge, moral values, and worldview. However, these cultural artifacts have seldom been studied systematically for their educational implications or integrated into the basic education curriculum (Lopez & Alama, 2020). As such, there is a critical need to document, analyze, and compile these Subanen stories for potential use in MTB-MLE programs. This would not only promote literacy in the learners' mother tongue but also nurture cultural pride and identity among young Subanen children (Tuazon & Ocampo, 2023; Baldonado et al., 2022).

In response to this gap, the present study aims to collect, analyze, and compile selected Subanen short stories from the province of Zamboanga del Sur. The study explores the structure, themes, and tone of these stories using literary analysis tools, including digital tone analysis software. Specifically, it seeks to

answer the following questions: (1) What is the structure of the selected stories in terms of plot, setting, character, and point of view? (2) What themes emerge based on Fleming's thematic categories such as judgment, survival, love, and heroism? (3) What tonal qualities are detected in the narratives? (4) What are the pedagogical and cultural implications of these findings for young Subanen learners?

By bridging indigenous literature and language pedagogy, this research hopes to contribute both to cultural preservation and educational equity. The resulting research output—a bilingual compilation of Subanen short stories with English translations—may serve as culturally sustaining teaching material in early-grade classrooms. Ultimately, the study affirms that teaching in the learners' own language, using texts that reflect their cultural heritage, is not merely a matter of curriculum alignment, but of linguistic justice and identity affirmation (Cummins, 2021; McCarty et al., 2018).

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically using literary content analysis, to examine the structure, theme, and tone of selected Subanen short stories. Literary analysis as a research method is rooted in the interpretive tradition of the humanities, which emphasizes close, critical reading of texts to uncover deeper meanings, cultural values, and stylistic features (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Content analysis, in the literary sense, involves the systematic examination and interpretation of textual data to understand how language, narrative elements, and cultural contexts interact within a given body of literature (Schreier, 2012). In this study, content analysis allowed for a nuanced exploration of how Subanen oral and written narratives reflect indigenous worldviews, values, and aesthetics through their literary form.

The qualitative design is particularly appropriate for this study as it seeks not to generalize, but to interpret the literary qualities and cultural significance of indigenous

narratives. Through close reading, the researcher carefully examined each text to analyze its narrative structure (including plot, setting, characters, and point of view), dominant themes (based on Fleming's thematic categories such as love, survival, and deception), and emotional tone (including affective dimensions such as joy, fear, or sadness).

This approach is justified given that literary texts, especially those rooted in indigenous oral traditions, are rich in symbolic meaning and cultural significance that cannot be reduced to quantitative measures. Moreover, using literary content analysis respects the complexity and integrity of the Subanen stories as cultural artifacts, recognizing them not just as texts to be read, but as lived expressions of heritage, identity, and moral values.

2.2. Data Source and Sampling

The primary data consisted of ten (10) Subanen short stories sourced from the published work of Fr. Bertram Tiemeyer, OFM, entitled "*Suk Tinändaan Nängak: Ang Kultura sa mga Subanén*." This book is a recognized compilation of Subanen cultural narratives, and its inclusion ensures the authenticity and cultural relevance of the texts.

The sampling design used was purposive sampling, which is suitable for qualitative studies that aim to explore specific characteristics within a bounded context (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria for selecting the short stories were: (1) availability of the text in the published compilation, (2) appropriateness of the story's length for early grade learners (ranging from five to sixteen paragraphs), and (3) presence of culturally relevant content suitable for potential use in MTB-MLE instruction.

2.3. Translation Process and Trustworthiness

As the original texts were written in Subanen, a translation process was necessary to conduct a literary analysis in English. The researcher initiated the translation based on his own working knowledge of both English and Subanen. To enhance the credibility and accuracy of the translation, the researcher sought guidance from Subanen experts during the initial translation phase.

To ensure linguistic and cultural validity, the translated versions were subsequently reviewed and validated by three native Subanen language experts. The following criteria were used in selecting the validators: (1) the validator must be a native speaker of the Subanen language; (2) the validator must be proficient and well-versed in Subanen linguistic and cultural nuances; and (3) the validator must have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, ensuring both linguistic competence and academic orientation.

These validators examined the translated texts to confirm the semantic fidelity, cultural integrity, and readability of the English versions relative to the original Subanen content. Their suggestions and corrections were incorporated to refine the final English translations used in the analysis.

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The researcher employed close reading as the core analytic technique, focusing on three literary elements: structure (plot, setting, characters, point of view), theme, and tone. Themes were categorized using Fleming's (2006) thematic framework, which includes universal categories such as good versus evil, survival, love, deception, and heroism. To support the tone analysis, the study utilized IBM Tone Analyzer, a digital tool that identifies emotional and language tones in texts, thereby triangulating manual interpretation with computational results.

To enhance confirmability and dependability, the results of the content analysis—especially interpretations of themes and tones—were presented again to the same Subanen experts. Their feedback served as a form of member checking, helping validate the researcher's interpretations and ensuring that the results authentically reflect the perspectives and values embedded in Subanen culture.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Structure

This study examined the structure of ten (10) Subanen short stories based on four key narrative elements: plot, setting, characterization, and point of view. Literary

structure was analyzed to determine the degree to which these indigenous narratives conform to or diverge from conventional storytelling frameworks, and how these structures reflect Subanen cultural logic and aesthetic values.

3.1.1. Plot Structure

Plot, in this analysis, refers to the organization of events in a narrative, typically encompassing exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Of the ten stories analyzed, six (6) conform to this traditional structure:

- Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Mängayam (There Was a Hunter a Long Time Ago)
- Sumämbag (Sumambag)
- Si Pusung (Pusung)
- Si Juan Papak (Juan Papak)
- Su Migdanguban Säg Bärung (A Disguise of a Cat)
- Su Migdanguban sä Guwak (A Disguise of a Crow)

These stories present a clear narrative progression and resolution, illustrating well-developed storytelling skills embedded in Subanen oral tradition.

Three stories—Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Ngalanän Sigupan (There Was a Man Named Hunsoy), Liganti na si Baktasun (A Giant Named Baktason), and Si Makasulug (Makasulug)—partially deviate from the normative plot structure. These texts notably lack a distinct falling action, an omission that may reflect an oral tradition's tendency to prioritize moral commentary or character depiction over a resolved conclusion.

A particularly notable case is Su Mimula Ginampay (The Ube Planter), which features a non-linear and layered plot structure. While the narrative begins with a conventional arc, it introduces a second conflict post-resolution, giving rise to a second rising action and climax. This nested narrative illustrates the flexibility of Subanen storytelling and supports the idea that indigenous narratives often resist rigid Western forms in favor of cyclical or episodic development.

Regarding conflict, eight of the ten stories depict external conflict—either man vs. nature or man vs. man—emphasizing survival, trickery, or community dilemmas. Si Pusung stands out for

its internal conflict, reflecting a psychological depth less common in oral tales. Meanwhile, Si Makasulug functions more as a character sketch or biographical account, lacking central conflict altogether but offering insight into moral and behavioral archetypes within the Subanen culture.

3.1.2. Setting

The setting—encompassing time, place, and atmosphere—is intricately tied to Subanen cosmology and daily life. All stories specify a physical location, frequently referencing the natural environment: farms, forests, rivers, waterfalls, and traditional dwellings (usually modest huts). These settings are not incidental but central to the stories, underscoring the Subanen worldview in which nature and community are intertwined. The settings reflect the ancestral domain ethos of the Subanen people, where land is not merely a backdrop but a living, sacred space integral to their identity and survival.

Temporal references are more sparse, appearing explicitly in only five (5) of the stories. Time is conveyed through culturally resonant phrases such as “after lunch,” “in the morning,” or “seven nights and seven days.” The repeated motif of the number seven carries symbolic significance, echoing creation themes and spiritual cycles in Subanen oral lore.

Atmospherically, the settings evoke a range of moods, from joyful and hopeful to melancholic and eerie. This emotional variation aligns with the stories' moral or didactic purposes, where atmosphere often serves to heighten the narrative's impact or deliver subtle commentary on communal values.

3.1.3. Characterization

Characterization across the ten stories reveals a balance between direct and indirect techniques. Seven stories (Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Mängayam, Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Ngalanän Sigupan, Si Pusung, Su Mimula nä Ginampay, Si Juan Papak, Su Migdanguban Säg Bärung, and Su Migdanguban sä Guwak) blend narrative description with character action and dialogue to portray both traits and motivations. This mixture allows for more dynamic and multi-faceted portrayals.

Conversely, *Liganti na si Baktasun*, *Si Sumämbag*, and *Si Makasulug* rely solely on direct characterization, where the narrator explicitly describes a character's traits. This technique reflects the oral tradition's tendency to reinforce archetypes (e.g., the wise elder, the foolish trickster, or the heroic youth) as moral exemplars.

The stories also employ two character-naming conventions:

- Specific names (e.g., *Hunsoy*, *Sankira*, *Ruinag*) convey individuality and personhood.
- Generalized identifiers (e.g., hunter, king, mother) highlight roles within traditional social hierarchies or archetypal functions.

The use of both naming strategies reflects a tension between individuality and universality in indigenous storytelling—personalized figures often embody broader cultural or moral values.

3.1.4. Point of View

All ten Subanen stories are narrated in the third-person point of view, a common convention in oral narratives. However, the stories differ in the type of third-person perspective used:

- Third-person omniscient, found in four stories (*Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Ngalanän Sigupan*, *Si Pusung*, *Su Mimula nä Ginampay*, and *Su Migdanguban Säg Bärung*), allows the narrator to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of multiple characters, offering a more layered understanding of character motivation.
- Third-person limited, used in *Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Mängayam*, *Liganti na si Baktasun*, *Si Sumämbag*, and *Su Migdanguban sä Guwak*, restricts perspective to a single character's experience, thereby aligning reader empathy more closely with one figure.
- Third-person objective, used in *Si Juan Papak* and *Si Makasulug*, offers a detached, reportage-style narration that omits access to characters' thoughts, reflecting perhaps a more communal or observational mode of storytelling.

This variation in narrative stance demonstrates the storyteller's control over audience engagement, shaping how much the reader knows and how deeply they connect to the characters' inner lives.

In sum, the structural analysis of the Subanen short stories reveals a rich tapestry of narrative techniques deeply rooted in indigenous

aesthetics and values. While several stories adopt recognizable plot structures, many incorporate elements unique to Subanen cosmology, such as symbolic use of numbers, strong ecological integration in setting, moral typologies in character, and a variety of third-person perspectives. These findings highlight the adaptability of oral traditions in communicating cultural knowledge while offering narrative diversity worthy of academic attention.

3.2. Theme

The ten (10) Subanen short stories analyzed in this study reveal a broad range of themes that reflect both universal human concerns and culturally embedded values unique to the Subanen community. Dominant themes identified include heroism, survival, love, deception, judgment, peace and conflict, and friendship—all of which emerge implicitly through the narratives, requiring interpretive reading based on character dialogues, actions, and resolutions.

The story, *Si Sumambag* (*Sumambag*) and *Liganti na si Baktasun* (*A Giant Named Baktason*) prominently exhibit the theme of heroism intertwined with survival, wherein protagonists are depicted as protectors of the community or family, enduring trials that affirm strength and resilience. This thematic focus aligns with Campbell's (2008) notion of the "hero's journey," in which the character undergoes transformation through confrontation with external dangers. These stories reinforce the Subanen valorization of bravery and perseverance as cultural ideals, reflecting indigenous knowledge systems that place a high regard on communal protection and endurance (Salazar, 2018).

On the other hand, the stories *Sug Mimula nä Ginampay* (*The Ube Planter*), *Su Migdanguban säg Bärung* (*A Disguise of a Cat*), *Su Migdanguban sä Guwak* (*A Disguise of a Crow*), *Si Makasulug* (*Makasulug*), and *Si Pusung* (*Pusung*) explore complex human relationships, often framed through the twin themes of love and deception. In these narratives, characters navigate emotional entanglements that test their loyalty, truthfulness, and personal desires. For instance, *Pusung* presents a cunning character whose wit and mischief disrupt the

conventional moral order—reflecting a form of “trickster narrative” found in many indigenous oral traditions (Hynes & Doty, 1993). These stories highlight not only romantic love but also familial and communal attachments complicated by betrayal or disguise, drawing attention to the fragility and resilience of trust within the Subanen worldview.

The story Si Sumambag further incorporates the theme of peace and war, emphasizing the disruptive consequences of conflict and the pursuit of harmony. This duality presents a sociopolitical layer to the otherwise mythic or moralistic tone of the story, suggesting an implicit critique of violence and advocacy for diplomacy—values echoed in postcolonial interpretations of indigenous literature as responses to historic and contemporary power struggles (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Themes of judgment and moral discernment are notably present in Su Migdanguban säg Bärung and Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Ngalanän si Sigupan (There Was a Man Named Hunsoy), where characters face the consequences of their actions and decisions. These narratives exhibit what Nussbaum (1990) describes as “moral imagination,” where literature becomes a space for exploring ethical complexity and cultivating empathy through narrative experience.

An emerging and culturally affirming theme is friendship, observed in Si Juan Papak (Juan Papak), which portrays solidarity, shared struggle, and mutual care as central to human connection. While subtle, the relational dynamics in this story emphasize pakikipagkapwa—a Filipino indigenous concept of treating the other as a fellow human being—which underlines the interpersonal ethic in Subanen storytelling (Enriquez, 1994).

It is also worth noting that all of the aforementioned themes are implicitly conveyed. The Subanen stories rely heavily on symbolism, allegory, and dialogue rather than overt thematic statements. This underscores the need for culturally informed interpretation that respects the oral and metaphorical conventions of indigenous literature (Finnegan, 2012). The researcher’s thematic deductions were guided by an interpretive-qualitative lens, informed by both textual evidence and contextual knowledge of Subanen cultural values.

Furthermore, upon comparison with Fleming’s (2006) framework of thematic categories in children’s and folktale literature—which include themes such as identity, transformation, justice, and belonging—it was found that four of Fleming’s crafted themes were not overtly represented in the selected Subanen narratives. This suggests a unique thematic orientation in Subanen oral traditions that prioritizes communal survival, ecological embeddedness, and moral negotiation over individualistic or internal themes often emphasized in Western literary paradigms.

In sum, the themes reflected in these Subanen short stories not only reveal the moral and cultural consciousness of the Subanen people but also demonstrate the richness and depth of indigenous literature as a site for both aesthetic enjoyment and sociocultural reflection. These stories are not merely folkloric remnants but living texts that continue to embody the ethical, relational, and spiritual frameworks of the Subanen community.

3.3. Tone

Tone, in literary discourse, serves as the author’s attitude toward the subject matter and is crucial in shaping the reader’s emotional and interpretive response (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). In this study, the tone of the ten (10) selected Subanen short stories was analyzed through a two-pronged approach: close reading of the texts and digital textual analysis using IBM’s Tone Analyzer, a tool that detects emotional, language, and social tones in written narratives.

The Tone Analyzer revealed that the predominant emotions across the stories were joy and sadness, both of which resonate strongly with the cultural and emotional contexts embedded in indigenous narratives. Joy is often tied to moments of familial harmony, romantic success, or personal triumph, as seen in stories such as Si Pusung (Pusung) and Su Migdanguban sä Guwak (A Disguise of an Owl). These stories reflect what Mares (2021) describes as “narrative eudaimonia,” or storytelling that promotes emotional flourishing through cultural continuity and moral victory.

Conversely, sadness emerged as a recurring tone in tales involving loss, betrayal, or longing—particularly notable in Sug Mimula nä Ginampay (The Ube Planter) and Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Mängayam (There Was a Hunter a Long Time Ago). Such emotional coloring supports Blevins' (2019) assertion that oral and indigenous literature often encapsulates both lamentation and resilience, functioning as a vehicle for communal catharsis.

In addition to joy and sadness, the Analyzer detected traces of anger and fear, especially in stories like Liganti nä si Baktasun (A Giant Named Baktason) and Si Sumambag (Sumambag), which depict themes of violence, conflict, and survival. These tonal elements align with Fleming's (2016) typology of literary themes involving conflict and resolution, underscoring how tone deepens reader engagement by dramatizing the stakes within the narrative.

Analytical and tentative tones were also found in several stories, notably in Iruni Gätaw Nuguna Ngalanän si Sigupan (There Was a Man Named Hunsoy) and Su Migdanguban säg Bärung (A Disguise of a Cat). These tonal elements suggest moments in the narrative where characters contemplate moral decisions or question social norms. As Yoon and Davis (2022) highlight, tonal ambiguity in indigenous stories often reflects nuanced worldview and philosophical reflection, offering a space for readers to interpret layered meanings.

In sum, the tonal diversity detected in these stories points to a rich emotional tapestry that mirrors the Subanen worldview—where joy is tempered by loss, and reflection is often spurred by struggle. Importantly, the integration of technology-enhanced literary analysis through the Tone Analyzer allowed the researcher to support subjective interpretation with data-driven insights, ensuring greater analytic reliability. This methodological synthesis demonstrates the value of digital humanities tools in enriching traditional literary analysis, particularly in underexplored indigenous literatures (Clement, 2017; Underwood, 2019).

This study reveals that the selected Subanen short stories do not entirely conform to the conventional literary standards typically

associated with Western narrative structures. The divergence in format, theme development, and tonal construction can be attributed to the unique cultural and oral traditions from which these stories originate. Unlike Western short stories that often follow codified structural patterns—such as Freytag's pyramid or genre-specific conventions—Subanen narratives exhibit fluid, cyclical, or episodic structures that are deeply rooted in ancestral storytelling practices.

The nonconformity observed in these texts should not be viewed as a deficiency but rather as a reflection of the Subanen authors' cultural positionality. These storytellers, many of whom are not formally trained in the conventions of Western literature, draw primarily from oral tradition and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Their stories are shaped not by literary theory, but by lived experience, memory, and cultural values. As such, these narratives mirror the Indigenous worldview and epistemology, privileging communal voice, moral instruction, and cultural preservation over formalist constraints.

In terms of themes and tone, the stories articulate core Subanen values such as heroism, familial loyalty, love, and moral judgment, often filtered through emotional tones of joy, sadness, fear, and reflection. These affective qualities reinforce the stories' function as cultural texts—meant not only to entertain, but also to instruct, preserve identity, and affirm community beliefs.

Ultimately, the structural, thematic, and tonal distinctiveness of the Subanen short stories underscores the need for a culturally sensitive framework in literary analysis—one that recognizes Indigenous narrative forms as legitimate and meaningful in their own right. Rather than forcing these texts into Western paradigms, scholars and educators must approach them on their own cultural terms, valuing their narrative complexity and sociocultural significance.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined the structural, thematic, and tonal dimensions of selected Subanen short stories, revealing a rich tapestry of Indigenous narrative practices that diverge significantly

from canonical Western literary conventions. The analysis shows that while these stories may not conform to the formalized structures often prescribed by Western literary standards—such as linear plot progression, clear-cut resolutions, or archetypal character development—they exhibit a culturally coherent logic rooted in Subanen oral tradition and community-centered storytelling.

The structural features of these narratives, including episodic sequencing, character-driven exposition, and non-linear conflict resolution, reflect the Subanen people's cultural values and ancestral modes of knowledge transmission. This divergence is not indicative of narrative deficiency but rather of cultural specificity, echoing the Indigenous literary strategies employed by writers such as Thomas King, whose works foreground oral storytelling and cultural memory as central components of narrative form (Gilbert, 2006). The Subanen stories analyzed in this study share this commitment to oral tradition, making use of devices such as repetition, didactic narration, and moral instruction to preserve and transmit collective knowledge.

Thematically, the stories explore enduring human concerns—love, survival, deception, judgment, and heroism—yet do so through the lens of Indigenous epistemologies and social realities. These themes are often embedded subtly within the narrative and require contextual and culturally sensitive interpretation. Likewise, tonal variation across the stories—detected both through close reading and corroborated by digital analysis using Tone Analyzer software—reveals a layered emotional spectrum ranging from joy and sadness to fear, reflection, and defiance. This affective richness underscores the emotive power of the stories and their capacity to reflect the Subanen people's lived experiences and worldview.

In sum, this study affirms the literary and cultural value of Subanen short stories as Indigenous texts that articulate an alternative yet equally valid narrative tradition. It calls for the expansion of literary analysis frameworks to include Indigenous knowledge systems and narrative forms, rather than imposing restrictive Western genre expectations. By doing so,

scholars can foster a more inclusive literary discourse that honors and preserves the diverse storytelling heritages of marginalized and underrepresented communities.

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